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MUSLIMS OF SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA: TRENDS AND PROSPECTS

Richard Pipes

Part I

THE CRUCIAL QUESTION in the entire future of Soviet Central Asia is the degree to which the native population of that region is succumbing to the process of Russification, actively fostered by the Soviet regime.[1] If the Central Asian natives are gradually losing their ethnic peculiarities and assimilating, either by being absorbed into the Great Russian population or by dissolving in a new, "Soviet" nationality, then Soviet Central Asia may be expected in time fully to merge with the Russian core of the USSR. If, on the other hand, they are resisting alien pressures and retaining their ethnic and cultural complexion, then Central Asia will continue to be set apart from the remainder of Soviet territories, and to merit distinct political treatment. In either event, the fate of Central Asia as a Russian frontier and a potential buffer zone between Russia and China may be said to hinge primarily on the cultural tendencies of its Muslim population.

In view of the great shortage of reliable, objective printed materials dealing with the inhabitants of contemporary Soviet Central Asia, an inquiry of this nature must of necessity have recourse to some unorthodox sources of information, among them the testimony of refugees from this area. It must also be confined to the broadest aspects of the question. Neither limitation is quite satisfactory from the point of view of scholarship, but since scholarship is a means for the discovery of truth and not an end in itself, it must be capable of adapting itself to the circumstances.

[1] By Soviet Central Asia are meant here both the steppe regions and Turkestan, i.e., the territory covered today by the republics of Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Prior to the Revolution they embraced the General Gubernie of the Steppe and of Turkestan, the Gubernie of Uralsk and Turgai, and the dependent principalities of Khiva and Bukhara. By the term "Russians" is meant not only the Great Russians, but also the Ukrainians and Belorussians, because statistical and other information for Central Asia rarely distinguishes among these Slavic subgroups.

RICHARD PIPES is Research Associate of the Harvard Russian Research Center and Tutor in History and Literature, Harvard University. He is the author of *The Formation of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), a history of the nationalist movements in the Russian borderlands during and immediately after the Russian Revolution.

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The primary sources of information for this essay consisted of the standard literature on Central Asia, pre-Revolutionary and Soviet, and of materials collected in the course of interviews conducted with 31 Muslim refugees from the Soviet Union, most of them from Central Asia.[2] These interviews concentrated on the personal experiences of the informants, and avoided, insofar as possible, references to politics, in order to reduce to a minimum the likelihood of deliberate concealment or lying. All the informants were male, and consisted, in their majority, of persons 30 to 50 years of age, with a high school or *tekhnikum* education, who had left the Soviet Union as laborers or prisoners of war in the course of the Nazi-Soviet conflict. They represented, in other words, largely the middle-aged Soviet "intelligentsia" (in the Communist sense of the word). The conclusions derived from the interviews were placed against the historical background of Central Asia for the purpose of separating the accidental from the essential, on the assumption that generalizations obtained from interviews were both more reliable and more significant in terms of the future when in agreement with pre-Soviet developments in Central Asia. The fact that in the main there is such agreement seems to the author an added reason for confidence in the correctness of the conclusions thus derived.

The main criteria used in investigating the cultural tendencies of Central Asian Muslim were five: religion, customs, language, ethnic identity, and the character and trends of the native intelligentsia. An attempt was made in each case to determine the extent and nature of the changes which had occurred under Soviet rule; to ascertain whether these changes agreed with or ran contrary to the spontaneous developments taking place prior to the 1917 Revolution; and finally, to evaluate their meaning in terms of the probable future.

RELIGION

The term "religion" comprises at least three distinct phenomena: a belief in the existence of one or more supreme beings; a set of rituals which gives this belief external expression; and a way of life based upon the principles explicitly and implicitly enunciated by the belief's founders. In analyzing the religious life of a community, these aspects must be clearly differentiated.

Russian Central Asia consists of two main parts, distinguished from each other by historic tradition, culture, and topography: the northern half, the steppe region (today's Kazakhstan), and the southern half, Turkestan (comprising the remaining four Central Asian republics). The

[2] These interviews were conducted in the summer of 1953 under the auspices and with the generous assistance of the Institute of Intercultural Studies and the Ford Foundation. I wish to express my particular gratitude to Professor Philip E. Mosely of Columbia University, who first suggested this task and was instrumental in enabling me to carry it out. I also would like to thank the Center for International Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for its kind help in completing this inquiry.